

#237 JOHN LIME
4TH RECONNAISSANCE SQUADRON, SURVIVOR

INTERVIEWED ON
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TRANSCRIBED BY:
CARA KIMURA
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(Background conversation)

Robert Chenoweth (RC): The following oral history interview was conducted by Robert Chenoweth for the National Park Service, USS ARIZONA Memorial, at the Sheraton Waikiki on December 4, 1996 at two p.m. The person being interviewed is John Lime, who was at Hickam Field with the (interviewee coughing) Fourth Reconnaissance Squadron on December 7, 1941. For the record, would you please state your full name, place of birth, and date of birth?

John Lime (JL): John F. Lime. I was born Indianapolis, Indiana, March 22, 1921.

RC: Could you also tell me what you considered your hometown in 1941?

JL: Indianapolis, Indiana.

RC: Okay, great. I'd like to begin by having you tell me a little bit about you coming into the service, the training you went through, and who you were assigned to and what your duties were, and what your rank was at the time of the attack. But begin first with just, you know, what got you into the Air Force.

JL: Well, I graduated from high school in 1939, Cathedral High School of Indianapolis, Indiana. And had, oh, three, four different hodge-podge jobs, you might say. Nothing with a future to it. And happened to come across an ad in the paper one morning, the Army Air Corps was advertising for trainees for airplane mechanics at Chanute Field, Illinois.

RC: Did you have any prior experience as a mechanic or working with aircraft, or any knowledge of aircraft?

JL: No, no, I didn't. No, I was strictly a rank amateur. And I found out very much so, a rank, rank amateur. But I joined the Army Air Corps on September 21, 1941. And went out to Fort Harrison, sworn in out there and sent then to Chanute Field, at Rantoul, Illinois, to begin training there in school. We . . .

RC: Did you go through a kind of basic training, or did you just go immediately into the maintenance training?

JL: Well, we went through about two weeks of recruit training, you might say, drills and so forth with the military, and then right on in to school. And it consisted of better time on aircraft engines and then instrumentation, airframe, and controls. Kind of a general run down of everything there is in an aircraft.

RC: Did you work with armament systems at all, or just . . .

JL: No, I didn't.

RC: Just the . . .

JL: Just the basic aircraft.

RC: Basic aircraft.

JL: Yes.

RC: Okay. So not radios or anything like that. Just the air frame and power plant.

JL: That is correct, yes.

RC: What --- did you work on specific types of aircraft in . . .

JL: No, the ones they had in school were a BT-13 -- oh, they had an attack plane there. The planes that they were using there in school were planes that had been in service, were not fit to be flying any more. And we schooled on those to get our knowledge.

RC: Okay, when did you finish your schooling?

JL: In May of 1941.

RC: Okay, and then what happened?

JL: Then I was given a thirty-day delay en route to report to Angel Island, California, to be sent to Hawaii.

RC: And you arrived in Hawaii . . . ?

JL: August 15 of 1941.

RC: And you were immediately assigned to the Fourth Reconnaissance?

JL: Yes, I was.

RC: Can you tell me about when you got to Hickam, what it was like? What was there? What was going on? What did the Fourth Reconnaissance consist of?

JL: Well, I was only with Fourth Recon three days and they sent us to Bellows then for recruit training. And I had a month over there then with that.

RC: At Bellows?

JL: At Bellows. Then back to Hickam to -- was assigned to a B-18. The crew chief was Sergeant John Meeham.

RC: Do you remember what aircraft? Did it have a tail number?

JL: Yes, but I couldn't . . .

RC: A code number?

JL: It had a serial number, yes. But no, I could not tell you the number.

RC: When you were over at Bellows, did you stay in the tent city . . .

JL: That is correct, yes.

RC: And were there aircraft operating out of Bellows when you were there?

JL: Yes, the O- 47's of the 86th observation squadron.

RC: So then you come back to Hickam . . .

JL: Came back to Hickam then and went to Fourth Recon and . . .

RC: And you had mentioned that the Fourth had a B-17.

JL: Had two B-17s, a C and a D.

RC: C and D.

JL: And four B-18s.

RC: B-18s.

JL: The B-18s was the bomber version of the Douglas DC-2.

RC: Okay. Could you talk a little bit about your duties? What did you actually do on this B-18? You didn't fly in the aircraft, right?

JL: No. I was not a flight crew. I was a member of the ground crew.

RC: Okay.

JL: And I helped (mumbles) keep the plane in order.

RC: How many people were assigned specifically to work on that one plane?

JL: There were four of us.

RC: That's including the crew chief, or plus the crew chief?

JL: That was including -- no, plus the crew chief.

RC: Plus the crew chief.

JL: Which kind of overdid it a little bit, but . . .

RC: So what kind of work do you recall doing on this plane when it was there?

JL: Check and make sure the hydraulics were all in order and no oil leaks anywhere and no extra slack in the control linkage. And checking the engine. Not very much to it, really, at the moment.

RC: Okay, then, it's Sunday morning.

JL: My habit was that I got up early and got dressed in clean uniform, showered, shaved and cleaned up, and went down and had breakfast. Was up in squadron day room at, oh, twenty minutes of eight, maybe. Started reading the Sunday paper and Mass wasn't until 8:30 in the morning, so I had time to kill before time to go to church. And at about, oh, three, four minutes of eight, why, plane came buzzing down through the parade ground area from the flight line going towards Pearl. Some guy said, "The Navy is giving us a buzz job this morning. It must be a carrier coming in."

And another one followed fairly close by (mumbles). I said, "What the hell is that guy doing?"

That argument going through there, that noise. So about five or six of us walked over to the edge of the screens there in the day room to look out. And the next guy down through there was no mistaking the strafing and no mistaking that great, big meatball on the side of that plane. And the language that came out for a moment was -- yes, very much on the blue, blue side. And we decided that up against them screens was no protection for some guy strafing. We got away from that area and got back towards more to the center of the building. The building very well put together.

RC: Did you realize at that instant what was going on? I mean, did you realize that you were under attack . . .

JL: Japanese were attacking us. It ain't -- some guy said, "Let's get the 'H' out of here in a hurry."

RC: What did people think?

JL: Shock, absolute shock.

RC: This is not something you'd ever considered could happen or would happen?

JL: We didn't think it could happen, but we didn't think anything was going to happen. And we were way out in left field on that one. And dozen more larger planes come through and one guy come through with a couple of bombs hanging underneath him. He laid one over towards headquarters and headed on the other one over to Pearl Harbor. And the guys decided the barracks is not the exactly safest place to be because, hell, (mumbles), all the guns and ammunition are over there in the armament section, in the hangar. Let's get out of here and get.

RC: So, did you go over to the . . .

JL: We went on over to the hangar and got a bunch -- oh, I would say there was about thirty of us. And they were trying everything they could to break the chains and the locks on the armament section doors closed. Not having much luck with it either. One guy tried to climb over the top of the fence over there and got stuck. And we messed around over there for maybe fifteen, twenty minutes and (coughs) one of the guys

said, "You know, my personal opinion, I don't think these hangars are the best place to be either, so let's get the hell out of here."

I says, "Where are we going to go?"

He says, "My attitude is get out in the boonies, out in the middle of the field!"

So gradually we scooted on out past the flight line there and . . .

RC: So you were not able to get any weapons or . . .

JL: No weapon at all. No. No, we . . .

RC: What about the airplanes and where were your planes, specifically . . .

JL: Sitting out in front of the hangar. They were lined up, the remains of 'em, because the Japanese took very good care of them planes.

RC: So they were hit right away. Did you see any of the planes get hit?

JL: No, I didn't. Did see the one B-17 that the Japanese, when they had hit, set off the fuse, the big flares in the middle of the plane, and it ended up with the front end of the plane setting very odd angle out there in the middle of the runway. And the after section just burnt up. How many were killed in that one, I'm not sure. But it was horrible. But we got out well into the center area of the grassy area of the flying field and set up (mumbles) watch. Some of 'em come in strafing towards the hangar line and all, but there was no place for us to be. And while we were out there, why then, oh, we'd been out there maybe fifteen minutes and that one group of high-flying planes come over and laid their eggs right up the hangar line. So we were glad out in the field instead.

RC: Wow. So then what? There was a break between the first . . .

JL: Between the first, the second, and the third runs on the place. (Coughs) Yeah. And while we were out there and had gathered kind of in a group, no idea where it come from or anything because there was shrapnel and slugs flying all over the place.

One of the guys in our group took a fatal slug, (mumbles), and he died there on the scene.

And our crew chief, he -- where they'd gotten it, I don't know -- but he had a thirty caliber machine gun up in the back turret on the B-18, was firing from there. And somebody come through on a strafing run and nicked his ankle. Did a thorough job on his ankle. So they had to take him to the hospital. Whatever became of him, I don't know.

RC: So then, then what?

JL: As the day progressed, why, people would fire salvos at -- I don't know what would turn 'em on, but, "Gas!"

Throw slugs out this way and that way and everywhere else. Try to keep 'em calm down a bit. They set up machine gun emplacements around the outside of Hickam Field.

I was in one of those and during the early evening hours, why, planes from the Navy -- I think the carrier was the *ENTERPRISE* -- sent planes up to Ford Island to get a degree of safety, maybe, and they were shooting them down. After dark, you can't tell who's what and which and whatever.

RC: Did you see the firing? I mean, were you guys shooting at planes?

JL: Some of our guys did fire at 'em, yes. And down around the Fort Kam area, why, tremendous amount of firing going on. And they knocked down several Navy fighters that were coming in, heading in for a landing. I don't know what the loss was on that one, but . . .

RC: About four or five of 'em. So what was your . . . did you get any guidance from your squadron commanders from the wing, or whatever, as far as . . .

JL: I don't know what information the first sergeant had, but there was no commissioned officer out around where we were at. I never saw a one.

RC: So you spent the night there?

JL: Spent the night out in the middle of that Algaroba bushes and all, and boy, they do draw mosquitoes. Phew! (Chuckles)

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

RC: Well, the next day, or even that evening, when things kind of settled down, what did you guys think? What were you thinking?

JL: Are they going to bring landing troops in here? Or they could --- lack of guns for us, why, they could run over us right now. And there was rumors around, you know, that they did have troops coming in. So it kind of left everybody on an edge, you know, wondering what's going on next.

RC: Were you ever issued weapons?

JL: I was fairly issued a rifle three days later. Of course, it wouldn't have done much good. I had a machete. That would have done a lot of good.

RC: How did you feel when the attack was going on? What were you thinking about? Other than just trying to get clear of the target areas, do you recall what was going through your mind?

JL: What in (mumbles) was up to? What in the heck was going on. Who started this and what for? Left everybody in a quandary as to what we should do next, and how we were going to do it. Left a mess out of more ways than one.

RC: Can you talk a little bit about what happened to you after the attack? Where did you go? What became of the Fourth Reconnaissance Squadron? All that sort of thing.

JL: Well, three days -- third day, fourth day after the attack, the Fourth Recon did a quick pack-up job onto the Army transport [*USAT*] *ROYAL T. FRANK*, and they sent us over to Puunene Naval Air Station on Maui. We were their only aerial support at the moment. They had no planes of their own over there. And we spent a couple weeks over on Maui. They were flying patrols out of there . . .

RC: (Inaudible) B-18s repaired by then.

JL: Yeah.

RC: So how many B-18s went over there to Maui?

JL: We had three, and a B-17.

RC: A B-17 and . . .

JL: Yeah.

RC: . . . three B-18s going over there. Were you the only unit that went over?

JL: Yes, yes. Just the Fourth Recon. And the -- we had a horrible crossing between Honolulu and Kahului, Maui. And the captain of the transport said that was the worst crossing he'd ever had through there for high water, for the tide, the surf, was that high. And between there and they left Maui and headed for Hawaii, or Hilo, and they never got there. They went down at sea. I think they were torpedoed. Yeah.

RC: So you stayed there on Maui for a couple of weeks, and the planes flew regular patrols out of there?

JL: Yeah. And we were over there two weeks, then came back to Hickam Field and we were on Hickam for, oh, about ten days or so, and then they sent us over to Bellows Field. They moved the whole outfit over to Bellows Field and operated out of Bellows. And then we started to get a few more planes.

RC: Was the 86th still over at Bellows?

JL: Yes.

RC: So you were there with the Fourth and the 86th were over there . . .

JL: That is correct. And then they brought a fighter group and they were on the far side of Bellows and they had room to operate from out there. They put in a long runway at Bellows. (Coughs) The original runway at Bellows was short.

RC: Do you recall what squadron, what fighter squadron was down there?

JL: No, I don't. No, I don't.

RC: Were they flying P-40s or P-36s?

JL: P-40s.

RC: P-40s.

JL: I never saw any of the P-36s after the first day of the -- well, they didn't -- I don't think they even got any of them off the ground, after December 7.

RC: (Inaudible) yeah, they were a couple of P-36s that got -- actually, it was a pretty mixed bag of P-40s and P-36s that got up, but there were still quite a few of them that were serviceable.

JL: Yeah.

RC: Obviously, the --- how long was it before you started seeing replacement aircraft come in and what were they?

JL: Well, the first replacement aircraft that I saw come in was on Wednesday morning, December 10. And I shouldn't say morning, right about noontime, on December 10. And the tower there at Hickam -- they hit an air raid alarm. And all in a matter of seconds, came with an all clear, and the P.A. system from the tower says, "Guys, you know, there's no flying over the Koolau range of hills. But goddamn, ain't that a beautiful sight, seventy-five P-40s up over the top of the hills there came in."

The *LEXINGTON*, on December 7, was at Mare Island, Frisco. They got word of the attack and the losses and what was going on. They started stuffing every Navy plane they could get into their hangar deck. And they called Hamilton Field and ask 'em how many P-40s they could get over to Mare Island now, with pilots and mechanics, at least one mechanic per plane. And they got seventy-five P-40s and put 'em on the flight deck. And it -- what would have been 1800 hours, Hawaii time, they come away from Mare Island with all that stuff on board. And they headed for Ford Island. And as far as I know, they set a record that has never been beaten. Mare Island, Frisco, Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, in seventy-two hours flat. But they launched those P-40s just east of Oahu. No losses. The Navy had instructed the air corps pilots very carefully, and they took 'em off, no strain, no pain.

RC: How about bombers? How about B-17s? Did you replace the aircraft . . .

JL: I'm trying to remember -- was up in the middle of the month before they started getting some B-17s in. And then in -- I can't remember the day that those B-25s and B-26s were able to get in either. Either late December or early January. And we got a fighter group -- I mean, a bomber group. I think they were originally based in California, but I'm not sure. And the B-26s had it close.

RC: Now, did any maintenance people go out to Midway. I mean, when the B-17s went out, did they just go just with their flight crews?

JL: There was only a few maintenance people went up there. And you weren't --- they . . .

RC: We're talking about flying out to Midway just prior to the Battle of Midway.

JL: They went up there with a minimum amount of maintenance people, because primarily they didn't intend to stay up there. They were going up there to see what they could do with the bombing runs and they knew it wouldn't last too awful long. They were about three days on Midway, and then came back.

RC: What did people think about that? How long before you started hearing news about what had happened at Midway?

JL: The day after. The Navy was having a good run-in with bombing the Japanese up there and was turning out more of an oddball turkey shoot. Japanese had an advantage, then the Americans had an advantage. Japanese had an advantage, then the Americans had the big advantage. And fortunately, thank god, it came out very good.

RC: How did things change, or did things change in Hawaii, after the Midway battle? I mean, did things kind of loosen up a little bit. I mean, was there still the same sense of . . .

JL: Urgency?

RC: . . . urgency.

JL: Singly, yes. Yes. They wanted to get the stuff going as quick as they could and get it on to the places closer to the Japanese that they could operate from.

RC: And you mentioned that in April -- was it in April, did you say, that the 394 . . . ?

JL: The military decided they no longer needed the reconnaissance squadrons. They were heavy bombardment to begin with. So they redid the numbers on all of the reconnaissance squadrons. And the Fourth Reconnaissance Squadron became the 394th Bombardment Squadron of the Fifth Bomb Group. And then, oh, let's see, it was in May or June that they sent the 31st Bomb Squadron, they went down to the New Hebrides, and then later got on to the canal, when they found room to land them on the canal. And gradually the group began to operate as four independent squadrons, like four almost in a group, of a group. And that went on for quite a long while, I think clear to the end of the war. The Fifth Bomb Group was -- each squadron was operating almost out on its own.

RC: It's kind of --- what I'd like to do is just get you to think for a minute about -- here, it's fifty-five years after December 7, 1941, what do you think about all this, today, in very general terms, but more specifically, as a member of the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association, and someone who's taken the time to come all the way out here again, time and expense. We have a memorial out at Pearl Harbor that commemorates those events. We have memorials at Hickam Field and at the other places where action occurred. Why is this important, in your view? Why should people remember Pearl Harbor?

JL: To keep America alert. That's something we should never, never let go of. Always remember keep America alert. And we have started downgrading ourselves in many ways. I'm afraid somebody is going to get a wild-haired idea and we're going to be back to (mumbles) and the situation we were on December 7, 1941. They seem to be letting other people tell us what to do, rather than do what is right and proper.

RC: What's your feelings about it today, coming back here again and obviously, you're going to go out to Hickam.

JL: Oh, yes.

RC: For the events and morning, and . . .

JL: Well, I'll miss the morning because I'm going to go up to Punchbowl. But I am going to find out what time their service

will be in the middle of the day or whatever, and I intend to be there for that. I don't want to miss that one at all. Five years ago the 31st Bomb Squadron and 11th Bomb Group -- well, a lot of people financed a memorial to go in there at Hickam Field, right near the flagpole. And I want to go back up and get my prayers said at the same location. And hopefully that we will wake up to reality. The United States is the only country that the Japanese government has not apologized to for their actions of World War II, and they sure owe us a big apology for December 7.

RC: Speaking about the Japanese just for a second, what do you think about the Japanese? What are your feelings about them?

JL: The people -- they're people and so forth. But I buy nothing Japanese that I don't have to. I'll go looking somewhere else to find it. And I don't know, I still have not forgiven their government. The people, I can forgive 'cause it's in my prayers. But I don't have to forgive the government, and I won't, until they do apologize. And I think they owe us a big apology. Sincerely do.

RC: Is there anything else that you'd like to -- particularly from the retrospective end of things.

JL: No. On our license plates at home, beginning next year, where they've had for the past five years, since we did get license plates, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Pearl, beginning next year, the Indiana plates will read at the bottom, "Keep America alert." And I think that's one thing that all of us ought to take in consideration and take care of. We need to, badly.

RC: Okay. Thank you very much.

JL: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW